


THEOLOGY IN THE LIGHT OF MIMETIC THEORY

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Summary

When we think about the mimetic theory and its developments in recent scientific thought, we quickly associate this belonging to the intellectual corollary of René Girard. This author offered a new look at violence and the sacred, suggesting that we are guided by a mimetic mechanism of appropriation so competitive, contagious and disruptive that the first communities would have succumbed to the level of extinction, were it not for our fortuitous ability to channel collective violence. and direct it against a victim; a scapegoat. The great intuition of this author is that the collective violence inflicted and sentenced against a scapegoat constitutes the heart of the sacred. Not only that, but human cultures were only possible, paradoxically, thanks to this first homicide that appeased the violence of all against a single individual. Therefore, the word that designates the persecuted or murdered victim is, in Girardian terms, “scapegoat”. In view of this, it can be pointed out that the place of the victim (scapegoat) in the primacy of Liberation Theology is not unknown. Likewise, this communication intends to analyze how this theological branch understands this victimization process and to what extent Girard's scapegoat can chorus the victims pointed out and protected by Liberation Theology.

Keywords: mimesis, violence, scapegoat, victim, Liberation Theology.

1. Introduction

This work proposal intends to fulfill the purpose of thinking about the place of the victim in the discourse and in the performance of Liberation Theology from the perspective of the mimetic theory of René Girard. It is important to highlight that this attempt was inspired by the meeting between René Girard and some theologians, representatives of Liberation Theology, which took place in 1990 in São Paulo ³. However, given the fecundity of this meeting, it inspired us to debate the tensions and convergences regarding the place of the victim in the social domain. With the intention of redrawing the sociocultural map of these victims, as well

³In this fruitful meeting, whose purpose fulfilled the task of thinking about idols and sacrifices, especially in the context of Latin America, the book was generated: René Girard with theologians of liberation. ASMANN, Hugo. **René Girard with Liberation Theologians**. Petrópolis: Voices and Editora UNIMESP, 1991.

as what Girard calls mimetic violence, a specific cut will be made in what he calls, as a consequent effect of violence, the victim mechanism.

It is worth mentioning that this text will only touch lightly on the vast theoretical field dedicated to Liberation Theology. We also justify that our main theorist, inspiring these few pages, whose intention is admittedly manifest and promising, in the field of Liberation Theology, will be Leonardo Boff. At the same time, from Girard we will highlight his main motto, which is the theory of mimetic desire, as well as the consequences of this desire, mediated and conflictive, responsible for the explosion of violence.

Violence among all the demons that plague us at the existential level is the main threat to peace and social cohesion. We have watched closely how violence occupies various sectors of social life. Currently, perhaps the scenario in which violence is most widespread is that of social networks and media, instituting a kind of virtual violence. Now, based on these notes, what can we characterize as violence? And more, how to perceive the underlying violence, and sometimes legitimized, in the societies? We understand, therefore, that every situation of victimization is characterized as violence, and can exercise its power in different ways. In fact, the victim, due to his subordinate condition, always suffers some kind of violence. Liberation Theology speaks of this violence, demanding the right to life and a minimum of social dignity for the excluded. On Girard's part, the excluded are the victims that Jesus himself made resound. Jesus is the perfect model of a victim who will not be forgotten. From the Christ event, the cries of these victims have echoed through time to the present day. Proof of this is that in the pages of the Gospels there is a strong appeal to the excluded. Jesus, according to Girard (1999, p. 157) inverts the victimizing logic by giving voice to victims and condemning persecutors. This is how René Girard interprets the Gospels. It is in this way that we will try to promote a possible dialogue between this insightful thinker, under the theoretical focus of Leonardo Boff's prominent lens, regarding the sensitive path of Liberation Theology.

2 From violence and victim designation to evangelical revelation.

When analyzing complex societies, as well as the motivating desire that would drive collective violence, René Girard realized that victims were scapegoats, who to some extent distinguished them from the majority by bearing the victim's marks. But what are victim brands? In the words of Girard (2004, p. 23) they are stereotyped tendencies driven precisely by presenting differences, causing the victim to diverge from the majority within a social group. Here we can already consider a first piece of information: if we look carefully, we will see that the victims, in these primitive societies, represented the minority, sometimes just a scapegoat;

an innocent sentenced by the majority. Is it not curious that, in this case, the designation of the victim converges to the nexus of all against one? This is because in Liberation Theology, in its vast theoretical production, the cry of the suffering majority is heard. It is the majority who live in misery, the majority of victims are in a condition of subalternity, judged by the implacable thirst of a minority, of meritocrats, colonizers, politicians, etc. Thinking from this angle, the victimization mechanism seems to be turned inside out. This is because Girard presents us with a victimizing logic driven by the crowd that pursues and sentences the victim, the scapegoat, sacrificed by the majority mimetically infected by violence.

This leads us, immediately, to Girard's sacrificial logic (2004, p. 55), in which the victim derives from the crowd's pursuit, united with the purpose of unloading the violence of all against one. The question that arises is: what is the difference between the sacrificial victim and the social victims? Even though the designation and the term "victim" can be applied in both cases, there is a considerable difference with regard to the designation of victim in complex societies. This is because, according to Girard (1999), the victimization mechanism is a consequence of the mimetic crisis that exploded in reciprocal violence, increasingly increasing, which were only appeased when they found a culprit, someone who carried the blame for the crisis. It is worth mentioning that, in these societies, the persecutors were convinced of their purposes. In other words, they believed in the guilt of their victims, so their actions were justified, based on the conviction of fulfilling this task. Approximately, it can be inferred that in the current social environment the victim is the result of violence. Be it social, moral, psychological, ethnic and racial, physical or collective violence, etc. But, after all, is it possible to specify what violence is? At least in Girard's theoretical body, violence seems to have a collective character, culminating in the expiatory sacrifice.

Let's see how Girard realizes that at the root of every social group lies a DNA of victimized violence. In other words, what is at stake is what Girard calls the mimetic mechanism. In order to understand the logic that governs such a mechanism, it is necessary to accept Girard's basic premise, in which the competitive desire may trigger an escalation of violence, increasingly exacerbated, which, if not controlled, the effect of this collective violence would cause volcanic consequences of extinction in *pasta*.

It is clear from this, albeit incipiently, that violence is driven by growing and contagious reciprocal and collective aspirations. Here the persecution seems to be justified by stereotypes, as it is believed in the guilt of the victim. The blindness of this persecution is justified because the victim differs from the majority. In Girard, the victim can be anyone with physical, cultural, hierarchical, etc. peculiarities. In possession of this information, it can be seen that in Girard

(2004, p. 22) the nickname victim has a more general meaning. There is no specific and contextualized identification of this designation. In this sense, the question arises: what are the victims in the soul of today's society? This means that in Girard's theoretical scope it is still very vague and imprecise who the victims are and how violence manufactures them.

Indeed, in the wake of Liberation Theology, the victims are everyone who suffers. Let's see how Leonardo Boff sees them: "The historical subject of this liberation would be the oppressed people" (BOFF, 2005, P. 34). Here, the virtue of compassion and charity arises from the cry of the oppressed, from the need of those who suffer the impositions and violence of hierarchical societies, of colonial ideologies ⁴, whose intriguing word merit imposes, as a priority, merit and primacy to minorities, classified as at the top of the social sphere and not, primarily, to the weakest, the least assisted.

In this sequence, Girard (2009, p. 226) provides us with new information about the victim-making origin. According to him, it is the Gospels that denounce the undue and bloody violence of primitive religions. For this author, the victim logic is inverted with the advent of Christ, since it is the victims who speak, they are the ones who ask for help. Girard's sharpness lies in showing that the story is retold no longer from the perspective of the persecutors, but of the persecuted. This is defended by Boff (2005, p. 34) when he says that the oppressed people must be aware of their victim situation. This information is very precious, as it reveals how the Gospels invert the mythical narrative by coming to the defense of victims. The Gospels give voice to the persecuted, clearly showing that it is no longer the persecutors who tell the story.

As Girard (1999, p. 141) points out, if mythology seems to disguise the victims' innocence, the Gospels put them in the clearest light, they are the ones who scream, protest and cry out for help. It is here that Liberation Theology finds fertile ground for action, in fact, this theological aspect results from this Christian aspiration that denounces such injustices. This becomes clearer when we think about the consequences of victimized persecution, its revelation and denunciation advocated by the Gospels. It is at this point that Girard's hypothesis echoes the center of concern of Liberation Theology, which is the victim.

⁴ On this subject, it is worth checking Walter Mignolo's intuitions about decoloniality. In general terms, we can understand that the coloniality of power develops not only in a consciousness that is based on the dominant class, but also designates the destiny of the excluded, of how they will live or die, therefore, the function of decolonial thinking would be to unravel, make pulsating and apparent what is unconscious and disguised by ideologies and dogmas, sometimes even regulated in the collective consciousness of the majority of the excluded, who in most cases, have their freedoms alienated. Walter and Walsh, Catherine (2018). *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. Durham/London: Duke University Press.

In Girard's hypothesis, we only perceive that the story was told by the executioners because the victim, in its most significant expression, who inverted the victimization mechanism, was Jesus. He is the inaugural victim of the protests and denunciations of injustices, and against the persecutors. Christ represents the voice of those who were formerly silenced. Jesus is the low point and the denouncer of victimized violence.

The intuition that will guide Girard is that the scapegoat mechanism will always give rise to the maxim of the victim mechanism, enunciated in the interrogation of Jesus in the Sanhedrin, when the collective crisis threatened to undermine the social balance. To quote in full, let us see next: "Neither consider it to be in your interest that one man should die for the people, and that every nation should not perish ." (Bible, John 11-50) This is the scapegoat logic uttered on the occasion of the trial of Jesus by the priest Caiaphas. Jesus is a victim, according to the gospels, who takes the blame, although his innocence is declared: "I find no fault in this man." As Pilate said (Bible, Luke 23-4). Unlike the sacrifices of natural religions is that the victim was guilty, his tormentors believed that their sentences were valid and legitimate.

This reveals our strange ability to always look for a culprit. This sentence seems to be a constant in the social sphere; whether in the simplest relationships or in wars. We always look for a culprit, act to pour out our wrath; a scapegoat that we need to sacrifice and say: that's the culprit! Or things like: we want justice! I don't carry that guilt! This shows, at the same time, that the act of sharing the blame can avoid blind pursuits in the search for scapegoats. Sharing the blame is also sharing the pain with those who suffer. Share the blame and have compassion. And to have compassion is to interrupt the cycle of persecution; is to prevent the victim logic.

In general, the form and determination of violence in the condition of victimization and its nuances were discussed in the lines above, both for Liberation Theology and for mimetic theory. It will be prudent, at this point, to try to understand how violence arises within a social group.

3 Mimesis and violence: condition for victimization and birth of the sacred.

Still under the design of unjust convictions and victimizing persecution in complex societies, the relationship between violence and the sacred will be demonstrated. Here, without any effort, we can notice that the title itself will be a key to reading in the sense that mimetic violence is the root cause of victimization.

According to Girard (1990, p. 14), The collective character of sacrificial violence makes this violence a sacrifice. It was necessary to unite the forces of collective anger against a single victim in order to have a sacrifice. Indeed, it is not under the paroxysm of any violence that the

sacred emerges, but from collective and inanimate violence towards the sentencing of the victim. The sacred is born of violence because the reciprocity and contagion of collective violence is so devastating that, in the first communities, it was necessary to choose a victim, a scapegoat, who would die in the name of all. Then, if the crisis were extirpated, after the scapegoating death of the victim, the paradoxically incredible consequence of this phenomenon was the deification of the scapegoat. From that moment on, the god responsible for solving the crisis was worshiped, elevated to the status of sacred.

In the general understanding of this hypothesis, it can be understood that the sacred and, therefore, religions are born from violence against a victim. We already know that, according to this theory, the victim is at the origin of cultures, we can say, of the sacred. Here lies the importance of tracing the original map of these victims of violence that represent the priority of the discourse and practice of Liberation Theology. It remains to be seen how violence directed against these victims arises. Elaborating this question better, we can ask: how, according to Girard, does violence arise?

The beginning of this whole crisis is the dispute over any object. Such an object has no representation without the triangle metaphor, it is necessary that two desires; two people, subject and model, complete this geometry. The triangle is formed because we do not desire the object in an autonomous and autotelic way, but because a model, another person, shows us, or we can say, teaches us what we want. From this image, it will be possible to see the mimetic triangle being drawn in the dynamics: subject, model and object. In this triangular movement, the conditions for ever-increasing disputes are placed.

What can we expect from this incendiary and contagious effect? With a little effort, in the quest to understand the dynamics of violence, it will be noticed that the object disappears. From then on, violence itself takes the place of the object. Violence alone dominates the game. Metaphorically, she is the god, the force of natural phenomena, the monsters we try to dominate. The images are created metamorphosed into supernatural fantasies as a way of covering up our greatest fear, which is violence and its devastating contagion. In the end, it is violence that seeks its victims, its scapegoats. It is not surprising that many symbolic, ritualistic expressions, contracts, ethical and moral appeals, etc., are established with the purpose of prohibiting violence. This is due to the contagious and tearing power of violence for any culture.

In the first communities, sacrifices offered alleviation of violence and collective crises. According to Girard, *assa* is the logic of the sacred:

“To understand human culture, it is necessary to admit that only the damming of mimetic forces by the interdicts, their channeling in ritual directions, can extend and perpetuate the reconciling effect of the expiatory victim” (GIRARD, 2009, P. 54).

In this quote there are several important indications, first we have the realization of the danger of mimetic forces in human relationships. However, moderation is also needed, this is where the function of rites and symbols are important. It is necessary to deceive violence that is why symbolizations in the ritual sense aim to represent, approximately, the first sacrificial act that would have appeased the terrible effect of the mimetic and violent crisis. Paradoxically, the rites make us leave violence little by little, but they also insist on remembering the paroxysm of this bestiality in human relationships.

To witness the cathartic function of sacrifices, we can reflect on the function performed by rites, including in current religions, since there is a constant repetition, in a symbolic way, of the first act that would have brought the community together in stability and collective cohesion. The rites manage to prevent, at least in a palliative way, the infectious continuity of violence. Hence, remembrance, repetition, in order to remember the cathartic effect of the first expiatory sacrifice. We can say in Girardian concepts: the rites attest to the sacrificial birth of the sacred. To make this hypothesis clearer, we can suggest that mimesis survives, like a virus, conditioned to collectivity, in every social domain. Now, how does that happen? If mimesis is competition that generates rivalries, when we desire the same object as our rival, the same mimesis represented in ritualistic repetitions (imitations) is configured in the sense of prohibiting violence. Strictly speaking, it is always mimesis that generates this paradoxical process of violence. In other words, if the imitation and dispute over the object ignites violence, the appeasement of this crisis is still a mimetic phenomenon, both in the unanimous choice of the scapegoat and in the subsequent ritualizations, or we can say: mimetic repetitions.

The insistence on the function of the rites is justified in the following ways: the rites are the result of our evolution in the cultural environment, the rites testify to our belonging to the sacred, as well as our sacrificial, violent DNA. This finding has the following implications: first, it reveals that the cultural genesis was built on the victim's blood. This if we agree with Girard (1990, p.121). However, the rites can also reveal that violence has become secular. It means that violence, here conceived as our ability to sentence and condemn scapegoats, still displays a certain vigor, sometimes legitimized, transfigured by cultural layers.

Let's see how this can lead us to reflect: currently in our society there are many types and forms of violence, sometimes disguised, or even legalized, as in the death penalty, for

example. Or, in the explorations throughout history, in colonialism, legitimized even by the Church, in slavery, in the persecution of women in the name of God. Finally, we want to say that, even if the Gospels condemn violence, despite this, our ability to symbolize, ritualize and legitimize (in the legal field in forms of laws) violence seems latent.

If in ancient societies victims were persecuted and sentenced, condemned to silence, forgotten by mythical accounts, nevertheless, according to Girard (1999, p. 137), the Gospels represent the low and the denunciation of victims persecuted and sentenced by the first communities. This means that, even though violence insists on infecting us, the effect of the Evangelical ferment in the insistent guidelines and recommendations in the propagation of love and charity are enough to think about getting closer and closer to the reality of those who have suffered. and suffer violence of all kinds, so they occupy a subordinate position and little assisted by the people who hold power.

Proof of this is that from the evangelical revelation of the victim mechanism, many movements emerged such as human rights, the strong invitation to forgiveness, fraternity and love, representing the fruits of Jesus' teachings. In this case, it makes perfect sense to bring Girard closer to the prominent and suggestive practical insertions of Liberation Theology.

3 Liberation Theology: A Victim Reading from Latin America.

The importance of Theology in the context of Latin America is remarkable, an environment in which the emergence of a Theology of praxis was possible and fruitful. This is because theology thought and articulated from the victim assumes a specific and dynamic way of acting in the world. The research pole is inverted regarding the function of theology, since due to the appeals made in the conciliar decisions (*Gaudium et Spes*) (BOFF, 2005, P. 52), theology assumed the task of structuring itself from the world and of human reality to make it theological and not the other way around. In the words of Boff (2005), the Church that is in the world needs to be a participant in the concrete realities of people. As we can see in these lines: "Vatican II insisted on the fact that the Church is inside the world, she shares in its hopes and anxieties. This awareness allowed theology to discover new fields and new objects for its reflection" (BOFF, 2005, P.52-52). This means that the challenges for this new theology have been, from that moment on, to think of an active strategy that is consistent with the reality of the victims.

Within this panorama, after the Second Vatican Council, the place of theology began to be redesigned as a science of faith, tradition and scriptures. Theology reinforces its role and place, carrying out a rational dialogue with history and cultures. The interpretation of the

Scriptures and faith would be configured, epistemologically, as a theological practice based on the reality of the victims. The interaction with society, the hermeneutic reading of the Scriptures in line with the sociocultural reality, the effort to spread peace among people and nations, the rights of life as a whole, the preference for the poor, especially in Latin America, as well as the dialogue with other religious aspects would represent the place and the theological work of this science.

Now, can we say that this actually happened? This still seems to be a great challenge that is always imperatively imposed. As Boff points out, “the historical subject of this liberation would be the oppressed people, who must develop an awareness of their situation as oppressed [...]” (BOFF, 2005, P.34). This means that, as a priority, there must be an epistemological liberation. Those who find themselves in a subordinate situation must be aware of this fact ⁵. It is here that theology becomes dynamic, articulating the message that is most specific to it and, therefore, consistent with the reality of those who really need liberation.

These multiple performances of Liberation Theology give it the meaning of word, logos and, consequently, hermeneutics. Since Christian theology starts from the presupposition of the Scriptures, it uses interpretation to transmit the contents of the faith and apply them to concrete life. In this sense: “the main scope of this trend lies in the fact that it has opened up other fields for pastoral care and for theological reflection, necessary for faith in our world” (BOFF, 2005, p. 53). Within what is said here, practice must be articulated with reason and that is how it seems to be possible to see how legitimate violence is. This is because, most of the time, we do not realize that we are acting violently in relation to our place in the social stratum, or in that alleged self-worth that many understand as natural, or, so to speak, in the self-centered narcissism that sometimes excludes, sentences and annihilates the other, creating situations of subordination and victimizing violence.

That is why sacred texts, as well as traditional ones, due to their complexities and necessary updating, need to be interpreted and contextualized for people's active, dynamic and creative reality. In this sense, Liberation Theology presupposes action, from its interpretation and reconfiguration in the reality of the world. When theology interprets the signs of social reality, starting from charity, mirrored as the vocational reality of the Gospels, it is not difficult

⁵ At this point, we take the opportunity to comment on the current decolonial model. The coloniality of power designates the destiny of the excluded, of how they will live or die, so the function of decolonial thinking would be to unravel, make pulsating and apparent what is unconscious and disguised by ideologies and dogmas, sometimes even standardized in the collective conscience of the majority of the excluded, who in most cases have their liberties alienated. Mignolo, Walter and Walsh, Catherine. *On Decoloniality: Concepts, Analytics, Praxis*. Durham/London: Duke University Press, 2018.

to perceive a sudden change, a horizontalization of the Word, converging to a narrowing between faith and the oppressed. In this dynamic, charity and love are ways of controlling competitive desire and, therefore, violence and its vocation for victimization.

It is necessary to recognize that, when the reciprocity of love is experienced, it seems almost suggestive and imperative to interrupt the reciprocity of violence that tends to victimize persecution. Perceiving the other, the victim, is living compassion, whose dynamics imply the place of the victim as the center and principle of this conviviality. It is precisely this inversion that Leonardo Boff speaks of when addressing the issue in the meeting between Girard and liberation theologians: “The intent of Liberation Theology is precisely to effect this epistemological turn: to seek to question, from the poor, the institutions of society and churches” (ASSMANN, 1991, p. 40). This epistemological turn is a process of de-alienation; liberation from the values that imprison us in such a disguised way that we hardly notice.

Thus, we approach the hypothesis of this work, which is assumed to think about the place of the victim as the head of dialogues and sociopolitical priorities. Therefore, the relevance of showing how this victimization process derived and continues to be a mechanism guided by desire and, successively, by disputes and violence. If persecution, exclusion and victimization are at the origin of cultures, as a natural instance in the collective sphere, it is not strange that such atrocity still persists, even if disguised or disguised in other (ritualized) forms, often legitimized, symbolized and covered up, and for that reason it still continues to make victims and sentence scapegoats.

4 Conclusion

It is difficult to say whether the task to which these pages set themselves fulfilled their effect. But, at least we can indicate that the seeds planted here will be able to germinate if the soil is favorable. This is because there are still many challenges that we need to face so that we have a minimum of engagement, respect and love for others. We leave here our desire to be able to express that human pain is universal, this because pain, suffering, poverty, victimizing persecution and death affect life as a whole. The illustration of the “parable of the good Samaritan” shows, didactically, that the suffering of fallen man and the imminence of death awakens a feeling of love for life, the life of all victims who most of the time are not assisted. Who are the victims of our current society? Who are the scapegoats most affected in this horrendous scenario of attacks via fake news, hate messages, and lack of social investment? Who are the executioners who persecute with relentless hatred the LGBT population, Indians, blacks, favela residents? In the logic of “a good criminal is a dead criminal”, violence always

predominates; then there will only be room for persecution and victim sentencing. It remains to be said that the Gospel takes effect in love and that love is opposed to hatred and violence.

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